



WILDFIRES and Airspace!

If you smell smoke, you're in the wrong spot

By Gary Morgan

Interagency-aircraft fly in support of ground-based units that are fighting wildfires, with the common goal to protect life and property. To facilitate the firefighting effort, temporary flight restrictions (TFRs) are placed on airspace over areas on fire. These airspace restrictions pop up, like fires, with little warning.

Aircraft that penetrate these areas put themselves, as well as those in the air and on the ground, in danger. At the very least, aviation assets necessary for the safety and effectiveness of ground personnel may be diverted out of the area. In the worst case, a midair collision occurs with an intruding aircraft.

Here's an example of how hazardous this can be, taken from a safety-communication report received by the forest service last year:

"An aircraft identified as a fast mover entered the TFR around the Tin Pan Fire at 1738 and proceeded down the Entiat River Valley, passing through the Tin Pan Fire area within the confines of VR 1350-1351 low-level route. The aircraft was identified as a Navy aircraft. Five aircraft (four helicopters and a fixed wing) were working in the Entiat Valley when this incident occurred.

"The field observer in the Entiat Valley sounded

the first warning that the Navy aircraft had entered the fire area. It was estimated he was about 200 feet off the deck, as he proceeded down the valley. At the entrance to Snow Brushy Creek, the Navy aircraft flew under a helicopter engaged in bucket drops at the entrance of the Snow Brushy drainage. Estimates put the helicopter at 500 feet above the ground when the Navy aircraft flew under it. Upon receiving the warning from the field observer, the "air attack" (an airborne on-scene commander who coordinates aerial resources and acts as liaison between the ground commanders) announced in the blind to all aircraft on the Tin Pan Fire that a fast mover had entered the valley.

"The fast mover passed the air attack about 500 feet below that aircraft. The air attack notified the Tyee Heli Base to hold all aircraft on the deck. The pilot of the air-attack aircraft tried to contact the pilot of the Navy aircraft on VHF guard frequency (121.5 mhz); the pilot was warned he had entered a fire area and aircraft were working on the fire. The pilot of the Navy aircraft did not respond to the warning; however, the aircraft did start to climb out of the valley.

"The Navy aircraft passed the air-attack location



In the first 10 months of FY07, more than 58,000 wildland fires covered almost 5.5 million acres. A review of wildland-fire, airspace-intrusion incidents for FY06 showed 41 violations of temporary flight restrictions (TFR), 11 of which involved military aircraft. When compared to the 10-year average of about 53,000 fires, this year has been particularly challenging for interagency firefighters.

and continued down valley, where he flew over the Tyee Heli Base camp. The pilots of two helicopters had to take evasive action to avoid a midair collision with the Navy aircraft.”


TFR information is available to all aviators to avoid inadvertent violation of restricted airspace during firefighting operations and other national airspace operations.

Military aviators can help the interagency wildland firefighters maintain a safe flying environment by doing two things:

- Before every flight, check notifications to airmen (NOTAMs) and websites that carry the latest TFR

information. One source is: <https://www.notams.jcs.mil>. Another source is <http://www.notams.faa.gov>. Both sites contain a direct link to the USDA Forest Service airspace website.

- Look for signs of wildland fire (smoke) and remain well clear. Keep a lookout for aircraft en route to or from the fire.

For more information on how wildland firefighters use airspace and aircraft in support of their mission, visit our website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/fire/aviation/airspace/web/index.html>. 

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**Mishap-Free
Milestones**

HMLA-369	16 years 8 months	100,000 hours
HMH-362	24 years 6 months	70,000 hours